

A SIGN OF SANITY
William Helps

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There will come a time when I am old and reading this back and thinking of better ways of writing this. But right now this will be at its most honest I think. This is about every mistake that was made, every false move that was taken, every moment you doubt yourself, every time you unintentionally caused hurt or was hurt, every dream that never came true, every time life beats you. I want you to know it is okay that it happened, because it meant you became stronger, wiser, better. The strongest thing life will give you is hope. Hold on to it; work with it, and one day you will prosper. I wrote this both for myself and for you.

Wooden panels fill the room and shimmering empty bottles line the walls. They wait patiently to be replaced. A cold breeze lightly touches my cheek as people enter and exit the bar, for the warm, or comforting light of a smoke, or to re-enter the true world. This is my home. This is a house of liars and recluses, a place full of monsters and wannabe immortals. Falsehoods, mistakes, wishful thinking, this is all what I live with now. This is my home, and I would not have it any other way. I shake my whiskey, mixing the ice cubes in further with the liquor, softening the punch. It is nearly empty; I may as well finish it now, and order another. As I sit alone in the far corner of the front of the bar, well away from all the tables and socialising, I glance over at my fellow consumers that stand near me. I must say the bar was unusually full tonight, a lot of young students and alike have come and gone this evening. It is all making me feel more and more like the old man that I am. The gabbling way in which they speak, the look of optimism in their eyes, I miss those days. The ray of hope that you seemed to feel when medicated confidence hit your stomach, and it was like the whole world loved you, especially (in my case) the ones you loved. People talk of how the generation nowadays do not understand what it means to converse or how to treat one another, but I feel like that is merely just nostalgia talking. Just from eavesdropping in on what some of the students were

discussing tonight, it merely just seems like a variation on what I used to talk about at their age. Sex, love, confusion, laughter, fear, education and one another, it is just different now, with technology consuming the majority of their lives. The conversation on when to ask somebody out on a date has changed into what to say to him or her through a text message. The debate of whether or not someone is being distant is down to whether they follow back on some type of social media or why they did not like this photo. The new generation are more concerned with how they come across. They think appearance equates to easy living. They want things to be efficient and quick, rather than enjoy the gradual growth that life brings them. The process of evolution and maturity has been sped up, and truthfully who can blame them for wanting to grow up? In a world which now consists of fast food, fast connection, fast service, who cannot get caught up with it? Everybody's attention span is decreasing, the kids... well they are just ahead of the curve. And they will always be.

I just like things to be gentler on my brain. This is why I come here; everything is kinder, slower, more forgiving. A place where everybody is equal in stupidity, everyone is drunk. And no one cares about anybody or anything. This is a temporary heaven from my thoughts. Thoughts which lie in some dark, bottomless pit of confliction and what if scenarios. I throw a severe level of pain onto myself and this place numbs that I think. It removes me from that void in my brain, and puts into a world of depersonalization, where I do not have think anymore.

Wind hits my face again, as I hear the swing of the glass door open and close behind me. A young man walks past, and he must just be part of the small coronation of students that sit in the far corner of the bar, playing some kind of drinking game, in which they clap their hands, and yell out some sort of chant. No! To my surprise, this young lad does not join them; instead he takes up a stool at the bar. A young waitress walks over to him, and she smiles, a sweet but somewhat lustful smile, and her eyes fix on him with a hint of hunger hidden behind them. The boy smiles back, he knew what this girl was thinking, something in his smile showed it, the way he grinned, sly yet devilishly handsome. Something about this kid reminds me of myself. The presence, and the posture where so similar to my own, and yet he was different somehow, I was never so cocksure of myself when I was younger. I remember having

extreme difficulties even keeping eye contact with a girl, let alone smiling at one. It was different when I met my wife I must admit, something seemed to click when we met each other. Not that it clicks anymore. It is like when you like a record and you start playing it over and over again, and you love it so much it becomes your favourite, then over time it starts skipping because of how much you played it, until eventually it becomes too unlistenable and horrific to play anymore. Our favourite record is *Blood on the Tracks* by Bob Dylan.

I must admit I admire this kid. The ability to enter bars alone and sit at the counter, was something that I only mustered up the courage to do when I turned thirty-five, like I was afraid to admit this is my home. He seems so comfortable in this environment, not a care given for how he appears to others. He is a silent, bright candle flickering in the room. Oh and the boy has the confidence to ask for a cocktail- a stylish enough choice, but it is extremely difficult for a man to flirt while he drinks a cocktail.

I must stop staring, sooner or later the boy is going to look over and be scared by the smiling old man, sitting on his own in the corner. I turn back to my own drink, the near empty glass of whisky. One more swig and it will be gone, disappearing into the beauty of my brain, darkening it, loosening it, taking hold of it, erasing me. Why do I drink you ask then, if I believe it to removes me from myself? Well I agree the taste is bitter, the hangovers painful (well I have learnt to overcome that part after all these years), and the company lonesome. But I must be honest; it unlocks something I cannot seem to find in my soberness. This sort of rapid and sudden burst of hope and clarity. It makes me a faceless shadow, a man without boundaries.

I hold the lukewarm glass with my fingers, and I throw back the last of it. I place the glass back on the table, with a light clink, and let the remainder of the drink settle in my stomach, whereby it will lay its soulless seeds. I look down at my hands, the veins pop out, the skin bags, the hair on the knuckles lie long, white and unshaven, and the fingernails lay uncut and small layers of black grit and dirt begin building up underneath. These freckled, aged hands look so alien to me, and it is hard to believe that they are my own. They should belong to a man who is out of control of his own life. I shutter, that is me.

I begin picking at the dirt between the fingernails with my teeth,

and glance back up at the young man. The waitress has left him alone now; in fact she seems to have disappeared entirely. He holds in his hand a white drink poured into a glass, of which I can only describe as a goblet. A rounded glass with patterned markings at the bottom. This kid, this odd soul, who sits alone at a bar, and orders a cocktail, and drinks it from such an absurd glass, how exactly can he not find this all strange for someone to do? I wanted to walk straight up to him, and grab him, and yell in his face "What are you doing here? What is this a joke? Saints don't drink at bars! Who do you think you are? Take your kind innocence and youth away from my kind!" But that would be even stranger, and useless, a confrontation would just amount go wasted oxygen and wasted words.

So I just sit and pick at my fingers, to comfort myself, because I am not my hands. I shutter again.

The kid turns his gaze towards me. Amusement and happiness come across in a smile that he grins at me. I attempt at smiling back, but my smile only comes across as more of a grimace. I have never managed to appeal as anything other than an unhappy, sarcastic, and joyless man, even when I was younger. Which is mostly due to my facial features, particularly the small, green eyes and bushy, downward curved eyebrows. Maybe this is why it is a good thing I am old now, I can get away with these kind of things. The boy seems to take my attempt at a smile, with a kind-hearted nature and proceeds to nod at the seat to his right. Did this kid just invite me to sit next to him? I do not know whether I should take up this offer or not, I prefer to do my brooding alone. As cheery as this kid is, there is a kind of happiness that is sickening to me when I am a sombre drunk. I do not need his kind to cheer me up. However, despite this, there is some kind of beaten deep wish for companionship. A wish for reason, a way of peace for broken bones and rotting hands. Another open hand to help me crawl my way back up from the pit; I really do not want to be alone tonight.

The kid is getting a lot more obvious with what he wants me to do now. He is gesturing with his hand for me to come sit down next to him. Soulless. Empty. Void. Skies. Rotten. Lost. Words. Past, present and future. I give into its torment. I stand up and sit down next to this kid.

I begin to study my new companion for the evening. At a closer look, the boy's features bare a striking resemblance to my own. His

hair brown, much like how mine used to be, well my hair is still brown, however there is much less of it, a bald patch lies in middle of my scalp, and the rest of my hair has deteriorated backwards, to the point where on my forty-fifth birthday I gave up on it entirely, and shaved it off, its what I have been doing since. His eyes green like mine, but minus the bags underneath them, and the sadness that seem to linger in my own whether I stare at myself in a mirror. His eyes contained the same level of innocence and joy that the rest of his body just seemed to exhume. His hands were clean and young.

Damn! I feel like a dad, well I am a dad, but my kids would never enter a bar alone, I do not believe they are even allowed to enter bars yet. This kid better have some kind of flaw, or I will just feel inferior the whole evening, a feeling I did not plan on conjuring up tonight. Maybe this kid has one of those awful personalities, or ear-scratching voices that make you wonder how they even discovered what vocals were. Probably not, this boy looks fine enough, a little too sweet natured but he is young; you are supposed to look like that. I am honestly clutching at straws on why I am better than a young adult, which makes it all tonnes worst. My wife always says to the kids to judge nothing about something, I cannot remember exactly what the saying is, because I ignore it, but I do have to abide by it nonetheless, just so I can set an example.

Stillness passes before the boy takes the plunge and breaks the ice.

“So what’s your name dude?” he asks, in a cool, calm voice. He may be a confident young man, but my god! Did he refer to me as “dude”? His voice reeks of youth. I shake my head in disapproval.

“That information shall remain undisclosed” I reply.

“Why’s that?” he enquires, oh so innocently.

“Do the formalities of names really matter at the end of the day?” I respond, firmly. Who should care about names in a place like this? A name gives me an identity, and when I am in a bar alone, I do not want to be seen as a person.

“I guess not” he says, disheartened. He turns his attention away from me towards the counter; undoubtedly wishing he had the waitress stick around.

We sit together in silence, neither one of us wishing to continue the conversation. We do not even inspect one another; brief glances are our method of communication now. The weirdest part of this

encounter so far is that even though I know there is another person next to me, I still feel alone. Like there is no one in the room, I am free of all other people that exist, especially this kid. Damn! My head is so much lighter, emptier. The seeds have finally hit me; I can feel its control loosening my fears, fogging up my doubts. I behold this boy, and think despite of all the things that make him better than me, I have one card left to play against him, and surprisingly it is age. Age equals to wisdom, and wisdom equals to respect. I am above this kid, because of the experiences growing up brings. This kid invited me over, not out of pity, but out of respect and awe. This kid wants to be in the presence of me, not the other way round. I cannot be bitter at someone who wants my company.

“What’s that odd drink you have there?” I ask, nodding at the goblet.

“It’s called a Whitebeard’s Revenge. Double rum, whole milk, some type of cream, and hazelnut dust on the top” he replies, taking a sip. What a fruity drink, but that’s the male population nowadays, lot more adventurous, and careless on such simple issues. I mean I cannot hate them for being themselves, if anything I am saddened I grew up in a more disbanded society. Well they are growing up in one too, but only because of us old timers that are keeping it that way really.

“Sounds like an interesting mixture” I respond.

“No it tastes like shit, way too expensive. My fault for trying something a bit different from whisky” he says, bitterly, taking a gulp from the goblet, and then preceding to shudder. He holds out the drink to me. “Do you want some?”

“No, I will pass, thanks” I wave away his offer.

I grab the attention of the bartender; unfortunately it is not the female waitress that served the kid but nonetheless, I order two double scotches on the rocks, for the kid and I. The kid gazes at me bemused, and I shrug and add, “You seem like you are having an awful time with that thing, so I thought I might get you an actual drink.”

“Thanks” is all the kid can say.

The bartender returns with the drinks, and I pay for both of them. The kid consumes the rest of his goblet, and with a disgusted look on his face, nods to me as a form of thank you. Once this kid settles down his previous “drink” (if I were to generously call it that), he places the goblet away from him, and grabs the scotch, proceeding

to take a huge swig. He breathes out a great sigh of relief, like a drowning man finally getting oxygen, seemingly overjoyed as the drink courses its way down his body into his stomach.

“Cheers I needed that one, dude,” he finally says. See there is that “dude” again, I did not know words could cause me to visibly shiver, but I guess I was wrong.

“Why is that?” I inquire.

The boy shrugs and states, “just... just been a long afternoon.”

Silence passes by again. But this moment does not feel particularly awkward; more so like some kind of recognition. A form of understanding. A silent acknowledgement, which is sometimes all that ever needed to be said. I feel a weird link with this kid, and I wonder why. Sometimes strangers click, and this does not have to do with things like love or lust or friendship, just sometimes people have a way of knowing each other’s thoughts.

But yet this kid is a stranger to me, I know nothing of him. I refused his name. I attempted to deny his existence momentarily. Oh, but then interest peaks, and I chose to rid myself of self-indulgent loneliness, because company with someone else is better than company with merely your own self. But right now I am sitting next to him... in silence.

“Are you waiting for anyone to come join you? I ask rather bluntly.

The kid shakes his head, looking at his glass, his head stuck in daydreams.

“What about that waitress you were talking to?” I add.

The kid snaps out of his daze, and peers at me confused.

“What, sorry?” he inquires, shaking himself awake.

“That waitress you were talking to, is she coming over to join you later?” I repeat.

The kid shakes his head, giving me a look of concern.

“I don’t-“ he coughs “I don’t like talking to girls will they are at work.”

“And why is that?” I quiz, shaking off his concerned look.

“Just something happens to all of us, whenever we are working. Our mind drifts away from us, and we just begin to fantasise about things. One of those is the *“oh that person looks attractive, I hope they come over and save me from this boredom”* type of daydream. Now when we come back to earth, that fantasy becomes unrealistic fiction and I just do not want to be a part of unrealistic fiction... I like things to matter.” He articulates. Speaking as if he believes it all to

be drivel.

I laugh because at first it is all I can think to do. I am sat next to a hopeful romantic. A hopeful romantic! Oh the conflict he holds, his brain stuck firmly in reality, and yet his heart is in another world. It is like trying to play a guitar with no strings, an impossible task. One cannot work without the other.

I feel for his confliction because I have fought this battle before. There is always difficulty trying to manage your expectations on things. You want to love, but sometimes you have to expect that is not all that factors into life.

I perhaps should say something more than a laugh; it may seem a little more respectful.

"Everyone likes things matter..." I think "but they only want things to matter if it is beneficial for themselves. So equally they want certain things not to matter too. Like I am sure you have had girls want or not want you. That is because they want what they want, and if you are not what they want, they do not... not to be disrespectful to them or you at all... but they do not want you matter as a potential romantic involvement." God that was a lot of trite that came out of my mouth just then.

"I agree" the kid replies.

He does? I think.

"But I do feel like what everyone wants is what they never seem to get" he adds.

"Well it matters on how much you want it I guess, some things you just got to fight for" I reply.

"And some things you have to stop running for, like unobtainable wishes. I mean I wish I could stop wanting them but, *there is something about the forbidden that makes them so desirable.*"

I think for one moment.

"That last bit" I ask "that was Mark Twain wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes it was" he replies, nodding his head "I like his literature."

"As do I" I agree "but I prefer his other quote '*there is no sadder sight than a young pessimist*'. Seems to relate to you a little I think."

"I am not pessimistic," the boy argues "I am just... just disappointed with some things."

I understood how he felt. In some sense, I thought like that when I was his age. I had all these big optimistic goals, and the pettiest thing could put your whole day at a stand still.

"I know what you mean by that," I say "it is a thing that gets worse

with time. The benefit is you start to learn more and more what is reality and what is fantasy."

"I just hope my happiness isn't a fantasy."

"The idea that love creates happiness is a fantasy. So maybe just try not to think about thoughts like that for a while" I attempt to advise.

"Yes, yes I guess you are right" the boy replies, breathing in deep. He turns his head and begins to study the pub. I turn too.

The bar's aesthetic was rather old fashioned compared to most trendy student bars. There was wood paneling everywhere, wooden tables, wooden stools, wooden chairs, wooden beams holding up the roof. The lighting was dim and gave off an air of gloom because of it. Wood and glass; just as bars used to be. Except it was not really in my mind, I remember going to bars, with white walls and flashing lights. I remember cheap, easily produced, lazy music that was undeniably catchy. I remember you still could not really see the person you were talking to, but at least the environment made you happier about it. This place is different, the music is calm, moody, honest; I believe I heard a Bob Dylan track earlier on, possibly *'Where Are You Tonight?'* I cannot tell; the music is played so faintly.

"They just do not fit in here at all," the boy proclaimed, staring over at the students who were all giggling and showing each other their phones.

"No one fits in a bar, it is a home for all the misfits" I respond "besides you are the same age, why are you looking at them with difference?"

"Sometimes I don't feel like one of them" the boy utters "I feel different, I act different, I think differently about things, not in like superior sense, just I live my life so void of control and care it makes me a complete outsider of an already uncomfortable society."

"You are just overthinking things more than others, you just need to stop seeing things so deeply and maybe you may enjoy things like they are."

"Maybe," the boy considers " I just feel like the way I see certain things is different. People don't care about things like... intimacy or understanding anymore. Or conversations, or talking, or the way we just examine the world. People just care more about the pictures they take, rather than the view. They want the image to last, not the place."

"Well it has always been like that." I argue "Everyone is so

concerned with their future that they forget their present, and soon it just becomes a past you long to relive. It is no different now than when I was your age. I had temporary issues that were unnecessarily at the front of my mind when I was living life's most important moments. We are just all concerned with how great we want to make our future become, that we miss out on our present. Shit, I am still doing this now, I mean I am more concerned with my past now than my future, but still, I am missing things I love."

"But it is difficult to do simple things anymore. Everyone is so attached to technology, and things like conversing face to face are considered awkward." The boy contemplates "I forget how people sound like sometimes, how people move, all of these little, unique eccentricities everyone seems to have. And yet, I remember how people text, how they write. I don't know when a full stop became a sign of hate, but it is now. A two word sentence can really play with your mind."

"Yeah, that is the only downside I believe you have in to the whole "texting" generation. So everyone sometimes overthink situations, especially developing young adults. It can be kind of healthy; it can give a better understanding of a situation for example. However, if it lingers too long it becomes this big monster of dark emotions and you start blurring the line of what is true and false. Somehow you always come back to sanity because you talked yourself out of it, you think that you are just exaggerating the truth, and there are no pieces of evidence to back up your insane thoughts. It is just that nowadays everything is written down, saved, sent, copied and pasted. So these tiny little details can mean so much, they give your warped ideas clarification. They are seen as an insane claim of proof, and that is what causes all these little thoughts that creep into everyone's heads, to be that little bit louder."

"Yeah my thoughts exactly!" the boy exclaims, rather loudly. So much so that some of the students turned their heads over towards us, and kept their gaze. I try to ignore them.

"Your generation is not terrible, it is just different, very different." I continue, "Everyone's voices are so much more prominent nowadays, everyone just wants to be heard, that is all. Your generation's problem is sometimes, you lot just choose the wrong voices to listen to."

"It's such a huge issue, everyone is choosing to listen to everyone else. I think people should listen to what they have to say."

"Why just themselves? If everyone did not take anyone else's advice, we would all just be impulsive narcissists. I admit certain things you can only figure out yourself, but still what is wrong with what your friends tell you? Or your parents?" I declare.

"I have an issue concerning parents and friends. They always seem to think they know what is happening in your life, but they don't. I can't take advice from someone who doesn't share my mind."

"That is not the right way of thinking things." I reflect, "Just because they are not part of your mind does not mean they are not willing to understand you, help you. They can give you some great advice, you have just to explain yourself really."

"That is a difficulty. The reason I have issues with myself, is because I can't figure out what is going on up there most of the time." The boy admits, tapping the side of his head.

"Well try... I wish my kids would. They never listen to what I have to say about their lives. It is all "dad you don't understand" or "dad you just aren't me" or "you have nothing to say to me that will count..." I began.

I understand that my life is shitty, but I still love my kids, I want them to help out, make their lives better, but they refuse to love me anymore.

"Oh so you have children?" the boy smiles.

"A boy and a girl. Both old now I think. I believe one just turned eighteen."

"Why do you think?" the boy presses.

"They like to keep themselves separate from the rest of the family. Birthdays, Christmases, Easters, I am not really allowed to celebrate anymore. I gather what is happening in their lives from the happiness they allow me to have."

"That is sad."

Open hands and long kisses. I want those, I want giggling and laughter. Not this swearing hatred. Separation by age affects all of us, different situations equate to different morals. I just hoped this would not affect the innocent; I wanted images to not warp minds. I wanted to watch childhood; I wanted to show happiness instead of fear and sadness. I miss young evolving life.

"Anyway I feel like kids are just trying to grow up fast, and independent from others. All this loses the point of wisdom which age brings." I conclude.

"Yeah. I just wish I grew up in a different generation sometimes I

guess" the boy utters.

"I never understand why people say that." I immediately respond "People have always been saying that for years, even when I was young. It is almost like they are trying to avoid their own lives, blaming it on a so-called better time in history. I loved my generation, the time I grew up in, but that is only because I miss being young, I certainly do not miss the society, the classism, racism, homophobia, you know. Your time is your time, do not miss it because of a nostalgic belief."

"So true." the boy breathes. "Thanks for this advice."

In actuality, I am telling myself this more than I am this kid. I have to stop living in fear of my future, and so concerned with my past; it affects what I have here.

What do I have here though? A glass of whiskey, a lack of energy, a piss stain of a life, and a well dug hole of self-pity. A hole of self-pity, that term should be my life's catchphrase.

I have to view myself from the outside. Okay what am I? I am an empty shadow perched on a seat next to a much younger gentler figure. I am not a genius, wise or kind; I just have gone threw a lot of shit, most of it I created myself. That does not make me wise it makes self-destructive. Previous conflicts do not make you a genius, they make you much more aware of who you are, a lot more honest in how you see yourself.

"I am just tired of waiting for things you know? I just want to start to doing them," the kid mumbles.

I let out a laugh, and shake my head. Oh yes, time! What a foul-playing mistress.

I lean in towards the kid and declare, "I have been waiting for things my whole life, and look at me."

"But you haven't really, you have certain things I could never attempt at getting" he shakes his head in argument. "A wife, a family-"

"Kid," I say sadly "if I had everything I ever wanted, would I be in a place like this? Drinking my sadness so easily like it was water? Spending the remainder of my life in the corner of a bar?"

"I guess not," he mutters, in solitude.

"I have a lot of stuff I never did because I thought well that person isn't ready to be with me yet, or that company isn't ready for this idea, or they won't find me interesting enough to invite to this, that or the other, all because I think time is the only thing that matters in

the world. That it will heal and grow things, sure sometimes it does, but it is not always what matters."

"Well why don't you do this stuff then? Why are you waiting?" the boy sighs.

"I am too old now, I cannot afford to go off and do all these things now. I have a comfortable job, which took a while to get, and I have a family of sorts."

"Hmm" the boy replies. His expression seemed down beaten, similar to when someone reluctantly agrees to something, just to save themselves from an argument.

"What?" I ask. This kid was clearly hiding something.

The kid exhales and remarks "well I am wondering what if a sixty or so year old man had told *you* all this, would you take his advice? Considering he cannot take it himself. This is how I feel."

"Well it is different," I think, "he is old, I would understand why he cannot-"

"This is what I mean though" the kid responds "I do not think you are old at all."

"Oh gosh no I am definitely-" I begin to reply, before the boy interrupts.

"I just mean you can walk, talk, and think well enough. Apart from a few personal issues, you have not got a good enough reason not to do what you want to do in life."

"Well I have to disagree with that, I certainly think my time has come to give on silly dreams," I respond, ignoring the interruption.

"Then this is a double standard type situation then, if you think you are too old for dreams, then you have no say in when I think I should give up" the boy cried, leaving the conversation in a very eerie note of silence.

Tick tock, a sound that affects all of us. We heard it in the classrooms, in the workplace as we wish for it to speed up, whilst in other moments we want it to slow down or stop completely. A beat so engrained in our heads, that we can hear it in our heartbeats, as we lie in silence, our bodies are saying you only have a set amount of time here, do not waste it. Get up and get out. Live. It is simple. Simple. Go outside. Every night saves the potential of another wasted day. Every glass helps us up a steep hill. Every gulp gives us another moment of peace. At least this is what it says on the tin, in actuality it does the opposite. Time still ticks, thoughts still linger, issues still remain unsolved. This is just a moment of freedom. I just

want this moment of freedom for another minute longer, just so I do not have to dread my ultimate return to the life I live. This second has been stretched for so long now, that I fear I will never manage to get it all back on track. It is like when a criminal is released from prison after so many years, he does not understand life outside his walls. That is I; I do not know real life anymore. My cell is this bar, and it is my home.

"Where do you work then?" The boy asks, cracking away at the stillness.

"Oh this job at a warehouse. I decide what shipments are going where, what stock needs refilling, do all the paperwork for stuff that going out and coming in" I reply.

I think I am putting myself to sleep just talking about it.

"Sounds pretty tiring" the boy considers.

"Tiring is just another word for dull. And it is dull. It is the most boring job I could imagine someone having. They big you up as this important "Shipment Manager", but it is only a thing slightly above the floor people."

"How did you get it?" the boy asks.

"I was one of the floor people. It was only meant to be temporary, then kids came along, and time got ahead of me. It was just I was making enough to support my family, that I thought I will keep it till something proper came along."

"Was working in a factory your ambition then?" the boy says, pondering.

"Oh god no! I wanted to be a writer, you know the journalistic sort. Visit countries, study cultures, that sort of stuff. I just well gave up that idea eventually, because life does not give you the route you want, it gives you a series of options and compromises. In my eyes, a job in a warehouse is the closest I can ever get to my dream. I mean they are similar job descriptions if you think about it. I am technically shipping things elsewhere so I am working with other cultures in other countries so to speak and I am writing down our interactions. So I am living with my compromise, it is the best I can get."

"Did you ever find something elsewhere?" the boy asks, pleading with his disappointed eyes.

"Yes. There was this job that meant I would no longer have to drag all these boxes around. It was something that would change my opportunities. A new venture, open me up undiscovered doors. Give

me something of great importance."

"What was it?"

"A job entitled Shipment Manager."

The boy laughs and I smile.

"Sorry to hear that" the boy chuckles.

"It is fine. A job is a job, and money is money. Although that last part only seems to be funding trips to this place nowadays."

"What about your family?" the boy innocently asks.

"I think my money is tainted because of this place, so therefore they see little of it. Besides I think they want to fund their own lives now." *My money is useless to them*, is what they said.

"Seems like quite a difficult situation you have then." The boy frowns "You know with your career and everything?"

I shake my drink and smile "this gets me by."

"I see," the boy responds, holding back any other comments. A second goes by before he blurts out "But doesn't it make it hard to stomach, knowing you have to rely on something to make you cheerful".

"Yeah I mean I can handle its limits, and sometimes, it does not always bring me contentment. But on days like today I just wish I could crawl into this drink. It would make me a lot happier with myself."

"That is alcohols only use. I mean who drinks for the taste of straight alcohol? Who drinks for the hangovers? The sickness? The regretful decisions? Not me certainly."

"Me neither I guess. I do find the taste of whiskey tolerable enough, its existence is similar to medicine."

"What is it curing then?" The boy laughs.

"I do not know, a painkiller for missteps perhaps. I am not too good at using metaphors."

"Ah so not a poet then?"

"No just a melancholic loner."

"I believe that is the definition of a poet."

"More so a critic" I smile.

I peer down at my glass. Somehow the enjoyment of freedom seems rather silly now; that may just be the glass's emptiness talking.

In all honesty, my thoughts are getting more clouded now. I feel carefree, clear, and open. All these ideas are just rushing through my head, that I feel this urge to go off and do them. There are just

so many people I want to see tonight, so many things I want to say, to laugh, to reminisce and then forget. Forget. That is the flaw though. It will just fade, like my memories are, like my love is, like my dreams have. My thoughts are just dying stars. Maybe it is best I do not go outside.

"Now I think about it, I could be worse off I guess" the boy mutters, "I quit smoking. So at least I am not a smoker and a drinker."

"Oh I never ever smoked" I shake my head.

"Why not?"

"Some people say I have an addictive personality."

The kid laughs, as do I. It feels nice to laugh again, not falsely at least. I do not have to pretend things like somebody's opinion on the economical state of the country is insightful or witty, whilst gritting through my teeth thinking *if your opinion matters so much than how come you are living your life on a minimum wage job and living off your wife's fifty odd k a year?* But then again why should my opinion count either, I hate my career, my work and most of all my current state of mind. Still I just wish I did not have to be so pleasant and correct sometimes.

Two students approach the bar. A brown haired boy, with blue eyes and large black glasses, sporting a white shirt and tweed jacket, elbow patches included. The girl is also brown haired, and wearing a wispy black and red flower patterned top and bleached navy jeans. The kid and I turn our heads towards the students, my mind is slipping in and out of reality, I need a period to rest my brain, and a tad of eavesdropping may help me keep a grip on real life. I am not sure why the kid is listening in too. Silence takes over our interaction again as we listen to the voices of the gabbling couple talk, whilst they wait for their drinks. At least I assume they are a couple.

"You know you didn't reply to my text," the boy (whose features were getting increasingly grossly exaggerated in my eyes. His eyes burning like fire, his hair fading backwards) says, putting his hand to his heart jokingly "I was hurt."

So I am gathering they may not be a couple.

The girl smiles reluctantly, like she is trying to hold back her thoughts for the sake of politeness and societal comfort.

"I was busy" she responds.

"What were you doing?" the boy asks, immediately.

"Things" the girl (who grows paler, emptier as she appears falling

backwards into desperation) replies.

She does not want to reveal herself to this boy with eyes of crimson.

"Yeah you know things," the boy snorts, speaking in this kind of fake pretentious accent "you got to deal with them, but you cannot leave them you know."

God that was bad, not just as a saying, but also as a form of a joke. I feel for this girl with flowers, clearly she is trying to please a lost desperate boy.

The girl smiles again, more forcefully this time. The bartender returns with their drinks. She goes to pay for her drink, but the boy intervenes.

"No, no, no I'll pay, don't you worry about that" he smiles.

"I got it I'm fine, thanks" the girl quietly replies, going to pay again. Now in my opinion, normally when someone declines an offer that is the end of it. However, this boy intervenes once again, this time placing his hand over hers and pushing it down. He gives the barkeep his money with the other hand.

"Seriously I want to pay" the boy forces.

"Yeah okay fine," the girl removes her hand from his, and places the money back in her pocket "thank you."

"No problem" the boy smiles happily.

The girl, who smells of roses and sounds like a calm sea, grabs her drink and turns and walks away. Her thorns are protruding outwards, and a storm brewing in her mouth and I swear I can see the flowers rotting on her shirt.

The crimson boy takes his, and walks back too, looking remarkably happy with himself, just like the face you have when you get a big job opportunity.

The Kid turns back to me, and snorts.

"What?" I ask, smiling a little myself.

The Kid cups his hand over his mouth, and snuffles a laugh underneath it. He laughs a little more before managing to control himself.

"I am sorry," he says, shaking off the dizziness "must have been the alcohol"

"It is fine" I wave off.

"That was just very strange, like I was watching myself or something" he laughs.

"Yeah I know what you mean" I agree.

““You never think how odd you act, until you see things from an outsiders perspective” the boy utters.

“But remember they are not you. So technically you are projecting yourself on others. They are strangers, they cannot give you answers, and if they could, it would not be honest. The only true honesty is up there.”

“I know” the boy mumbles “It’s just I can never seem to find honest answers in my mind though, it is so clouded.”

“That is why we drink,” I state “light minds equate out to light hearts and burdens. Without burdens, we find clarity. We find answers.”

“I guess” the boy hesitates.

“And besides I never talk to strangers anyway” I retort, “personally they cannot you the way friends can.”

“But you are talking to me” the boy affirms “do I not count as a stranger?”

“Well yes, technically” I say “but I do not know why, I do not see you as one somehow.”

“I guess I will take that as an compliment” the boy laughs.

“Ah take it more of an acknowledgement,” I correct.

I turn my head over to the table of students. The girl (looking increasingly impure) is sitting as far away as possible from the boy in an attempt to state her lack of interest in him. The boy is clearly not seeing this, the large number of glances in her direction illustrate his infatuation.

I focus my mind away from the red roses, and back to our conversation.

“You know,” the kid, proclaims, whilst averting his own eyes away from the table “with the amount of mind games that go on in modern day relationships, it is difficult not to fall into its grip. Everyone has to be sort of mysterious nowadays, no one can ever just be like “*hey you seem interesting, how do you see the world?*””

“Unfortunately it has always been like that. There is a reason why people read mystery books, for its insolvability.”

“Romance obviously is an important part of a relationship” the boy retorts.

“Not necessarily, romance is formed after attraction, which in turn is formed from interest. One comes after the other. Interest is one part mystery, one part sexual. Now that is not always the case, but it is what seems to have been the backbone to the relationships I

have witnessed.”

“Not true, not all relationships are like that.”

“That is why I said ones I witnessed. Relationships I have had personally have been different, no mystery, no build-up. All honest, all intimate.”

“That cannot be possible.”

“Oh, but it is. I have examples.”

“Such as?” the boy asks.

“Best example I can give is my wife.”

The boy glances down at my hand and back.

“I must ask, where is your ring?” the boy states.

“It is an ongoing situation” I reply, pulling my golden wedding ring out from of my pocket. “I only wear it when I am doing honest work, something I am proud of doing. Drinking is not one of them. I would love to wear it all the time, just some days it feels a bit too heavy on my hand.”

“I thought it was one of those eternal things, through good and bad times, thick and thin, and all that.”

“A piece of bent metal should not be the representation of a relationship. That should be seen through other things instead of some shiny object that only exists because of some useless tradition. I mean if this meant to be a metaphor for a relationship than it is a pretty pricy one.”

“Then why did you engage in this “useless tradition”?” the kid asks.

“It was the mistake of a young optimist. I was in love. It is hard to gather that when you look at me now, but there was a time when I thought things like love were all you needed to have a happy life. Like it is some kind of key to your brain, all of these feelings would just go away like that.” I click my fingers “I did not know that love is like some kind of drug. It makes you calm, happy, you see everything as beautiful, but one day you just wake up and it is like the worst hangover you can ever have. I must have just been blind when I bought this.”

“But yet despite this bitterness, you still remember how you two met?” the boy responds.

“Oh yes of course I do!” I declare, “I could never forget something that fascinatingly bewitching. I was sat at a bar similar to this one, with a group of guy mates on a Friday night. We were all looking to go out to a nightclub, so we had to get the drinks down us fast,

because we were all too broke to afford the drinks inside this club. The bar was absolutely packed full of people, young guys and girls our age, all looking for that little bit extra that life could offer us tonight. It was very much the typical eye contact, bad flirty opener, and you were in. I mean the offer of a drink usually went down well too. I, myself, was very much unlike my other counterparts. They would love to sit and have drunken conversations about *“this bird did this last night”* or *“shit, did you see that girl’s arse just then”*. When I say they would love to sit and chat about these girls that is all they would do. They would never talk to them, because they were afraid of being genuine.

So we sit and speak on and on about love and work and pain and honestly anything we seemed to hate, never taking in how picturesque everything is. You are young, everyone there is, everyone has no responsibilities, and every path is open, with the possibility of re-routing. The lights are shining, the crowds are huge, the booze is sort of cheap and music is well tolerable. You lose so much of that moment when it happens; it is only when you think back on it, you are just wanting it to happen again, so you can take it all in one last time. And sometimes, a moment can be so perfect you just to live that single second over and over again. That is what happened when I saw her. Standing with her group of girl friends, talking to the waiter behind the bar. I want to say it was one of those things where I could describe every little detail of her figure and her looks, but it was not like that at all. Just sometimes without any specific reason, a person just clicks in your head, the way she stood, the way she smiled, the way she talked, the way she held herself, was just... well mind-blowing. She was attractive too, she had this whole wild, free kind of feeling to her, but I mean in my eyes I was not seeing an attractive person because of her looks. I just saw this girl, in her own little way owning everything she was, content and perfect in who she is. She did not need to feel cared for or need someone to save her from the perils of loneliness. She was in love with being herself, and that is the most attractive thing anyone can ever do.

Anyway I was stood on my own waiting for a drink, which was meaning to be made up by the waiter who was talking to my... wife. Now at the time, my thoughts dwelled more in anger, which was directed at the waiter, yes of course for snatching this girl before I got the chance to talk to her I guess, but I think I was more

concerned with the drink at that moment really. I mean as speechless as she made me, I myself was not in need of company and I thought I would only ruin her happiness. Anyway this waitress, serving some other customers, taps the waiter on the shoulder and points over at me. I was giving this kind of disapproving scowl. The waiter nods, smiles at my... well, wife, and begins making my drink. I look down at my wallet to get the cash to pay for the drink, when I get this tap on the shoulder. It was the girl.

"Hey sorry, I didn't know you were being served" she says, so sweetly.

"Oh don't worry about it, you two seemed to be getting along, I am sorry I interrupted" I was quite the apologetic type.

"What, him and I? No, we just know each other from my previous job. Besides I don't really go for the sleazy bartender type" she smiled a paradisiacal smile. It lightened her face up even more, as well as her surroundings.

"Oh, okay" is all my mouth could get out. I turned back down to my wallet, took out the cash, and handed it to the waiter, who was staring my wife down as fallen angels do. I took my change and drink, and went to walk away, before I was tapped on the shoulder again.

She smiled and said "sorry again but a couple of my friends were wondering if you boys would like to join us tonight?"

"I will ask," I manage to stumble out of my mouth, whilst my stomach was doing backflips.

So I tell the guys, and they look back me dumbfounded, before immediately jumping out of their seats, and walking over to the group of girls. I was surprised they even agreed, let alone go and eagerly start talking to them. Drinking can sometimes really bring out the socialness in people. I turn around and witness the groups merging, most of whom I still know today. Some of them are married, some of them are divorced, some of them I rarely see, and some I never saw again after that night. It is funny how little you think about the smaller people in your life, I tend to wonder where is that person I merely spoke to once in smoking areas or at the market. What were they like? What occurred in their lives? Life is just this big pot of people; you can only get to know only so many people, you could spend your whole life not finding the one who is your double. I think I did, because there was only one person who stood away from this newly formed crowd, and she was whom I

wanted to talk to the most. She was not trying to find someone, and honestly neither was I, but I still felt compelled to talk to her. That is what I did.

“Hello again” she smiled.

“Hello” I stutter.

Then silence. My mind went blank for one moment, all out of small talk, and light jokes. I did not want this to fall into another one of those casual conversations that means nothing, and is just there to fill the space between now and the end of the evening. It was so difficult to think of a way of breaking the ice without it just becoming the scratching of the surface of this iceberg.

“Just to clarify, my previous job was waitressing and no I did not like it.” She proudly proclaimed, “The idea of being paid to get harassed every shift from creepy old drunks is horrific, and yet I get that daily otherwise at my internship... so, maybe the fact I was getting money wasn’t so bad. Still the projection men seem to get over me is always sexual, and undoubtedly it disgusts me, why would you think I would find interest in someone who only sees my outside, and cares not for my inside. Uh! It’s horrific!”

And with that all the barriers I was building up against myself collapsed. The expedition had begun.

I smiled, and she smiled back.

She shook her head “I’m sorry. I am relatively drunk right now, words tend to spew out of my mouth.”

“Don’t worry about it, I agree with what you said in all honesty” I reply.

And from then onwards the conversation grew; we got to know each other more and more. We talked about families, jobs, history, music, and goals. The group transferred to the nearest nightclub, and my future wife and I decided to sit outside together for the majority of the evening, for “fresh air” we called it, but we knew we wanted to talk more. By the end of the night, when the club shut off its lights, and all our drunken friends had stumbled off home, we walked back together. Nothing happened that evening, she gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek and her home number, and that was that. I was not expecting anything though, like sex was some kind of reward for a conversation. The conversation was enough to make my evening.

From then onwards, we kept running into each other, at supermarkets, in pubs, in coffee shops. Until one day, I called her up

properly and asked for a favor... for her to join me for a meal, and I had been asking for favors ever since.

The story is crazy, but I love thinking back on it. It is just I spend so much time up to that point, imagining every possible scenario that could happen and yet situations can come so out of the blue that you can never prepare for them. And that is what makes them so fascinating bewitching, because they leave you in a state where you can not think or prepare on what will happen next, you just have to live it. It is strange, how sometimes life can just hand you people who do that."

And with that, the happiness in my mind, returned sharply back to reality. There was a moment of quiet, where the boy just sat there, amazement etched into his face.

"Wow! That is a beautiful love story" the boy exclaimed.

"Yes, it was."

"Was?" the boy reacts.

"Well all stories start off beautiful, it seems to drop off into conflict after that" I say, bitterly.

"Oh no! Why is that?" the boy replies.

"Love is difficult. Shit, people are difficult. Everything becomes a battle. Your morals, your opinions, your lifestyle, they all become issues when you are no longer living your own life."

"But I thought love was a safe haven from all those troubles?" The Kid asks

"I used to think that too. But somewhere we just got tangled up in our heaven."

"Is it unfixable?" the boy considered.

"Nothing ends till you forget it. You just have to consider is it worth the struggle?"

"It depends what kind of love it is."

"An imperfect, incomplete, masterpiece."

I see drops of my drink on the table. I see the last of my ice slowly dissolve in my drink. I feel the glass warm due to my touch, the sweaty old hand clutching to it like life-support. This is the reason for my wasted youth. I have surrounded my thoughts with fear, loathing, nostalgia, and hate. I have lost myself whilst trying to find myself in a bottle, a glass, a drink.

God! What is this I am thinking right now! I sounded so out of control, would I have ever thought this without my delusions? I wish

I had never have lived how I did; I wish I could repair my layers, scrub away my uncleanness. Stop! Try to focus on what reminds you of now.

“You know, it sounds really odd but that story really reminds me of this poem I read a while back, just this thing I came across.” The Kid replied.

“A poem?” I stammer, trembling away from my thoughts “that story did not really lend itself to poetry.”

“No it isn’t about the story or the poem, it is about what it means.”

“I am confused. What do you mean?” I stumble.

“It is just hearing that, triggered something. You know like how certain things just jump into your thoughts. Like clarity, or honesty, or reality.” He said, frantically “sorry I need to write it now. I can’t remember a lot of it but...”

“Final calls!” the barkeep yells, “We will be closing in thirty minutes!”

Several of the students perked their heads up, and turn to one another. They all nodded in agreement, and get up for another drink. A couple of the gals turned their heads our way, undoubtedly checking out The Boy sat next to me, probably questioning why he is with someone like me. Boy and son, they probably think. Makes sense though, we look similar enough to pass as that. One of the girl’s stares is particularly piercing, like she is both understanding and disturbed at the same time. The bartender pours their drinks. Two double vodka cranberries, a double Tennessee Whiskey and coke, a pint of beer, and a round of some red coloured shots, so many different ways to ruin yourself. How can an object so colourful create so much darkness? Damn it! I am really fading away right now.

The Boy glares up at the clock on the wall in front of us, and glances back at me, with a look of uncertainty.

“What is wrong?” I ask.

“Well I should be going soon, I think” he replies, turning away from the clock.

I shrug “well if you had to be somewhere you have to be somewhere.”

“Well I do have tell you this thing first don’t I?” he says.

“Yes this poem you found, that in someway reminds you of me” I say “well begin I guess.”

The boy grabs a nearby napkin, and begins writing down the

poem.

He continues writing for a while, a long enough amount of time that the students managed to finish their drinks and got up to leave, glancing our way before exiting.

This Kid seemed so invested in my life. It has been surprising. I wonder if I will ever get to catch up with this boy again, after he leaves. To understand more of how he sees things, what matters to him, and why I should care about myself. But doubt lies in my mind as to whether or not this will happen. This all seems like a moment, some kind of crossing of paths. In ten years, this will all seem like an illusion in my mind, a long old memory in my diminishing brain. All that is said will matter, but how and why will be forgotten. This Boy is some kind of phantom, a hallucination, an anomaly, as am I too him when he looks back on this.

The Young Man finishes and hands me the napkin.

The poem read:

“Wooden pencils, half chewed from impatience,
White chalk, black walls,
Blue seats and grey tables,
A child sits calmly within a wild crowd.
Brown hair, left crazy from carelessness,
A question is asked,
What person inspires you?
A child answers “a Leader”.
Black pens, snapped in half, for merriment,
Blue blazers, striped ties,
Laughter and fear,
A boy sits gabbling with his friends.
Brown hair, styled to perfection,
A displeased teacher asks,
Who do you wish to be?
The child jokes “a King”.
Wooden tables, empty bottles,
Drunken young numbers stumble around outside,
A light entrances a brown haired misfit,
Her hair and eyes intrigue him, dancing through a mist,
She touches his shoulder and asks a question,
“What are you seeing here?”
He jokes. She laughs and walks off,
He then responds truthfully, “a Future”.”

I gape down at these scribbling's on this scrunched and ripped paper, and something within me awakens. I know of this poem already.

"Hold on" I gasp, "this is only half of it, I know the second half."
I grab the pen, and begin to scribble down the rest.

 "Church bells, guests crying with happiness,
 White dresses, and flower bouquets,
 Drunken speeches, and joyful laughs,
 A man sits next to his beloved.
 Time passes, and shouts begin,
 Screaming hate, and smashed dishes,
 Purity howls, "*Who acts like this?*"
And through tears, he responds "a Husband".
 Cries at five in the morning,
 Early evenings and monitors,
 Tension and sadness fill the air,
 A man must find a way to escape.
 He runs into away to a world of dark lights,
And dark bottles, and dark corners of his mind,
 The light of life yells, "*What are you?*"
 The drunken man sighs, "a Father".
 Long goodbyes, and sad memories,
 Hateful thoughts and remorse,
 Fill the air of this place,
 A shadow enters the establishment.
 Liquid burns down his throat,
 Relief, satisfaction begin to linger,
A fellow creature laughs and says, "*Who do you think you are?*"
 He knows who he is "A Man".
 Wooden panels, shimmering bottles,
 Cold winds, and steel bars,
 Ice rattles in a glass,
 A figure sits alone in the corner.
 Missed opportunities,
 He thinks. Milestones missed,
A familiar face approaches and asks a question,
 And the figure responds..."

“A Human” I say, staring at my writing. What is this? Why does this affect me so much? God! This is all so confusing.

A bell rings.

I am lying to myself. I know what this all meant. It's figures and periods in time. There will always be past experiences, and future ones.

The bell rings again.

Life is a lit candle, slowly burning out. You cannot just blow it out, or wait for it to flicker and die. Yes the hot wax burns, but you have to hold it no matter what. You cannot just watch life burn.

The bell rings for a third time.

It is simple. It is all so simple. Simple. Live. Simple. Simple. Simple. Simple.

The bell rings one final time. I turn to The Boy and ask if he wishes to leave. But he has already gone, and I am back in practicality. The bartender wiping down the tables glances over and approaches me.

“We will be closing in like three minutes dude. Do you want to finish the last of that?” he states, pointing down at the last of my whiskey.

I nod. The barman goes back to cleaning up the place. It is empty except for him and I now. I glare down at the whiskey; it is nearly empty, I may as well finish it now. But is it worth it? Does my stomach deserve any more abuse? Do I deserve any more tonight?

“What happened to the young waitress that was serving tonight?” I ask the barkeep.

“The only company I had tonight was myself, as was your company I gather?” he replies, continuing to work.

“Yes, yes I guess it was” I nod in agreement.

I sigh and grasp the glass with my ageing hand, ready to swallow the contents. But something comes over me, a feeling I have never truly felt before. Intolerance. This is all I feel about myself. I have accepted this lifestyle of self-pity. I have allowed things to spiral out of control. I may be older than I used to be, but that does not make me useless. The end of a bottle cannot answer some things, especially when certain things cannot be fixed. I still long for the last of this piss-coloured, disgusting misery of a drink, but perhaps it is best to leave the bitterness for another day and find happiness in less destructive things.

With all my heart can muster, I push the drink away from me, and get up. Nodding to the bartender, who returns the farewell, I pull

hard on the cold steel bar of the door.

I exit and look up at the night's sky. The stars twinkle in my blurred vision, and I smile. Not because the view is pretty, but because of what it means. Tomorrow is coming and it is going to be a beautiful one.